

# Humor in Byzantine Letters of the Tenth to Twelfth Centuries

## *Some Preliminary Remarks*

FLORIS BERNARD

*Ego vero omni de re facilius puto esse ab  
homine non inurbano,  
quam de ipsis facetiis disputari.*

*I believe that a witty man can  
converse about anything more easily  
than about wit itself.*

Cicero

*Ceux qui cherchent des causes  
métaphysiques au rire ne sont pas gais.*

*Those who look for metaphysical causes  
of laughter are not funny themselves.*

Voltaire

These two maxims highlight the problem of writing studies like this one: any attempt to analyze humor in a serious way is doomed to fail.<sup>1</sup> When trying to describe the essence of humor in an objective, scientific way, the humor itself slips through our

fingers and we fail to contribute any insight beyond the near-magical revelation that humor, in a spontaneous situation, brings to the knowledgeable hearer. Humor and scientific discourse operate according to two very different, even mutually exclusive, principles. Humor (by which I also mean witticisms, playful language, jibes, and so forth) relies on tacit understanding rather than factual knowledge, on subtle insights and real-life experience rather than formally established rules. Humor works exactly because it does not explain itself. It is commonly agreed that having to explain a joke kills the fun instantly. Humor is often blatantly irrational and illogical. That is humor's force, too. Instead of logically coming to a conclusion, it brings things together in a surprising and incongruous way. Its success occurs in the instant when it unexpectedly provides a resolution of two entirely different levels of understanding, which in normal discourse are kept apart.<sup>2</sup> One of these levels is implicit or taboo, but is suddenly confronted with another more pedestrian level of understanding, allowing us to see the world in a new light. Instead of, or exactly because of, this logical incongruity, humor makes sense to us on a scale entirely separate from rational argumentation. Therefore it can express thoughts we might not otherwise give voice to, ideas we have not been consciously

1 For good overviews of theories of humor, see the still useful D. H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Melbourne, 1951); and J. Morreal, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA, 2009). For the epigraphs, see Cicero, *De oratore* 2.217 and Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, s.v. "rire."

2 S. Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (Berlin and New York, 1994), which also has an excellent overview of earlier theories.

formulating.<sup>3</sup> At that moment of revelation, humor does not expect more language, more discourse, more reflection, and especially not scientific rationalization. Instead, it expects a bodily reaction: laughter.<sup>4</sup>

Since humor operates within a framework totally different from normal, “logical,” discourse, it is able to address issues and ideas that normally do not come to the surface. It lays bare ambiguities in the dominant discourse of a given society, and gives people an opportunity to vent their opinions or express their ideas on issues that are normally difficult to discuss (sex, food, religion, and others). Because humor can circumvent social decorum and has direct access to thoughts latent within us, it is able to bring emotional relief.<sup>5</sup> But this also means that humor can be subversive. It often embodies a conflict of social norms, a transgression of conventions. From an anthropological perspective, jokes challenge dominant ideas of order.<sup>6</sup> Humor is a less controlled domain of speech, and hence a domain where criticism can be expressed, albeit in an indirect way. In medieval societies, where free speech was suppressed in many ways, humor fulfilled an important role in expressing divergent voices.<sup>7</sup> Humor is by definition a social act.<sup>8</sup> Humor is a potent agent in the chemistry of human relationships and the makeup of communities. Humor defines communities more sharply and aggressively (and hence also more effectively) than other

discourse precisely because it tests people on their sensitivity to hazardous or implicit issues. Hence, humor can confirm shared mentalities and shared ideologies.<sup>9</sup>

I shall consider here humor in a broad sense, also including witty and playful speech, banter, and mockery. Play, as Johan Huizinga brilliantly demonstrated,<sup>10</sup> is a series of acts governed by rules that take place in a well-defined situation demarcated from “real life.” Play also needs a certain tension, a certain risk, in order to be effective. As he argues, play is inherent to human culture and can very easily, even in intellectual and literary pursuits, lead to a sportful contest. The function of play, and the need to demarcate it, will be important issues in the letters I study here. I will not delve deeper into the issue of irony, because this is often complicated by (imitation of) philosophical tradition, but the subject is potentially very rewarding.<sup>11</sup>

The analysis of historical humor and play, especially of a culture that has become somewhat alien to us, is a hazardous enterprise. As Guy Halsall notes, it is very difficult to develop hermeneutical tools to understand humor from the past. One would need to reconstruct the whole system of social norms and codes.<sup>12</sup> Humor is usually based on knowledge shared intimately between speaker and audience. It is often also essential, as we will see, that this intimately shared knowledge is inaccessible to outsiders. And more than anything else, humor depends on context, on tacit presuppositions that are not easily conveyed across different cultures. Sometimes we find that Byzantines are funny when they may not have intended to be so. We perceive some statements as so vastly exaggerated that we believe they cannot have been meant in earnest. Conversely, Byzantine jokes are often lost on us: we do not appreciate them, or worse,

3 The “incongruity theory” of humor ultimately goes back to Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kants Werke: Akademie-Ausgabe* (Berlin, 1790; repr. 1968), 5:332.

4 A. C. Zijderfeld, “The Sociology of Humour and Laughter,” *Current Sociology* 31 (1983): 1–100, esp. 33–37.

5 The so-called “relief theory” of humor was made popular by Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1905; repr. 1970).

6 M. Douglas, “Jokes,” in *Implicit Meanings* (London and New York, 1975; repr. 2010), 146–65.

7 A. Classen, “Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Literary, Historical, Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Reflections; Also an Introduction,” in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, ed. A. Classen (Berlin and New York, 2010), 1–140, here at 5. For humor in the (western) Middle Ages, see also G. Althoff and C. Meier-Staubach, *Ironie im Mittelalter: Hermeneutik—Dichtung—Politik* (Darmstadt, 2011) and K. Beyer, *Witz und Ironie in der politischen Kultur Englands im Hochmittelalter; Interaktionen und Imaginationen* (Würzburg, 2012).

8 See also H. Bergson, *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (Genève, 1900; repr. 1924), 18 and 25–26.

9 Zijderfeld, “Sociology,” 47–52; W. Röcke and H. R. Velten, eds., *Lachgemeinschaften: Kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Wirkungen von Gelächter im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin, 2005).

10 J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (Haarlem, 1938; repr. 1952); English trans., *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, 1971).

11 Efthymia Braounou has prepared a study on irony in Byzantine literature, “Eiron-Terms in Greek Classical and Byzantine Texts: A Preliminary Analysis for Understanding Irony in Byzantium,” *Millennium* 11 (2014): 289–360. See also J. Ljubarskij, “Byzantine Irony: The Case of Michael Psellos,” in *Βυζάντιο· κράτος και κοινωνία*, ed. E. Chrysos, A. Avramea, and A. Laiou (Athens, 2003), 349–61.

12 G. Halsall, “Introduction: ‘Don’t Worry, I’ve Got the Key,’” in *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. G. Halsall (Cambridge, 2002), 1–21, esp. 7–10.

we do not even recognize them. This is because humor is based on exactly those things for which we have no record: tacit social conventions, hidden mentalities, unspoken prejudices, and invisible social norms. But it is also for this reason that the cultural historian can gain so much from studying humor. It reveals information that otherwise would remain in the dark.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars were slow to discover humor in Byzantium,<sup>14</sup> both in its literary texts and in its visual art.<sup>15</sup> Byzantine literature is generally portrayed as serious and even dour, although some exceptions have been recognized. Hans-Georg Beck summed up this stereotype when he wrote: "What one always feels is lacking in this [Byzantine] literature, is humor, even if it is not entirely absent."<sup>16</sup> Gustav Soyter's overview of humorous texts is quite slim, and letters are not treated.<sup>17</sup>

Christianity is mostly portrayed as aggressively inhibiting, and even prohibiting, laughter and the comic element in culture. In his important history of laughter in Greek culture, Stephen Halliwell saw a strong "anti-gelastic" element in early Christian theological writing.<sup>18</sup> The Church Fathers state on many occasions that Christians must take control of their emotions, feel sadness for the wretched state of this mundane life, and for the inherited sin that weighs on humans. Moreover, there is no biblical evidence that Christ himself ever

laughed.<sup>19</sup> In one of John Chrysostom's homilies are particularly strong condemnations of humor, playful language, and laughter.<sup>20</sup>

However, upon closer examination of patristic texts, a more nuanced position emerges. In one of his rules, Basil of Caesarea states that one should not laugh out loud, since this shows a lack of restraint, but a smile is a sign of a harmonious soul.<sup>21</sup> Clement of Alexandria condemns buffoons and jesters but allows for a smile, even saying that surliness is unbecoming, arguing that all facial and bodily expression of emotions should show restraint.<sup>22</sup> It would seem that moderate humor and moderate laughter (smiles) are acceptable. Perhaps our view is distorted by the situation in western Christianity, where medieval Latin struggled to unequivocally express the concept of a smile.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it would be wrong to suppose that general behavior simply complied to these theological and philosophical prescriptions, or even that a majority of the populace was aware of them.<sup>24</sup>

Considering the reticence in scholarship about the more frivolous aspects of Byzantine culture, Margaret Alexiou famously asked: "Can it be that it is Byzantinists, not Byzantines themselves, who lack a sense of humor?"<sup>25</sup> Since then, Byzantinists have made greater effort to understand and study humor, and as a result our view of Byzantium as an overly serious, static, stifled society has changed. The Ptochoprodromic poems especially have been at the center of attention: scholars have pointed out the sexual innuendos, scatological jokes, and humoristic references to everyday life that are abundantly present in these poems.<sup>26</sup> In historiographical texts, we find evidence for convivial

13 J. Haldon, "Humour and the Everyday in Byzantium," in Halsall, ed., *Humour, History and Politics*, 48–71, esp. 54; see also idem, "Laughing All the Way to Byzantium: Humor and the Everyday in Byzantium," *Acta Byzantina Fennica* 1 (2002): 27–58.

14 On Byzantine humor in general, see P. Marciniak, "Byzantine Humor," in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. S. Attardo, 2 vols. (Los Angeles, 2014), 1:98–102; idem, "Homo Byzantinus Ridens: Byzantine Attitude towards Laughter and Humour: Some General Remarks," in *Homo Byzantinus*, ed. A. Z. Milanova, V. Vatchkova, and T. Stepanov (Sofia, 2009), 83–92.

15 For humor in Byzantine art, see E. Dauterman Maguire and H. Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton, 2006), 135–56.

16 H.-G. Beck, *Das literarische Schaffen der Byzantiner: Wege zu seinem Verständnis* (Vienna, 1974), 24: "Was man in dieser Literatur immer wieder vermisst, ist der Humor, auch wenn er nicht völlig fehlt."

17 G. Soyter, *Humor und Satire in der byzantinischen Literatur* (Munich, 1928); and idem, *Griechischer Humor von Homers Zeit bis heute* (Berlin, 1959), 83–123.

18 S. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge and New York, 2008), 471–519.

19 N. Adkin, "The Fathers on Laughter," *Orpheus* 6 (1985): 149–52, for a brief overview of relevant passages.

20 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 17 (PG 62:117–20).

21 Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 17 (PG 31:961–65).

22 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, ed. M. Marcovich, *Clementi Alexandrini Paedagogus* (Leiden, 2002), 2.5.

23 J. Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages," in *A Cultural History of Humour from Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (Cambridge, 1997), 40–53, at 48.

24 Classen, *Laughter* (n. 7 above), 17–18.

25 M. Alexiou, "The Poverty of Écriture and the Craft of Writing: Towards a Reappraisal of the Prodromic Poems," *BMGs* 10 (1986): 1–40, at 31.

26 Ibid.; eadem, "Ploys of Performance: Games and Play in the Ptochoprodromic Poems," *DOP* 53 (1999): 91–109; Haldon, "Humour

laughter, practical jokes, and punning emperors.<sup>27</sup> The Byzantines took an interest in the *Philogelos*, an ancient collection of jokes.<sup>28</sup> Many jokes took place in the court, which seems to have been a space that allowed a certain license and nonconformity,<sup>29</sup> also allowing a place for the court jester (*mimos*).<sup>30</sup> Much humor can be found in literature that is called “satirical,” and this humor often equates with aggressive abuse and deliberate humiliation.<sup>31</sup> Laughing in late antique and medieval texts is often “laughing at”: jokes and laughter are chiefly made at the expense of others.<sup>32</sup> In Byzantium there was a strong sense that being ridiculed in public was a shameful experience. Paul Magdalino’s study of derision in Byzantium shows that mockery was targeted at specific persons, with the aim of damaging the reputation of enemies.<sup>33</sup>

and the Everyday”; and idem, “Laughing All the Way to Byzantium” (n. 13 above).

27 L. Garland, “‘And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon . . .’: An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” *Parergon* 8 (1990): 1–31. For specific authors, see I. Grigoriadis, *Linguistic and Literary Studies in the Epitome of John Zonaras* (Thessaloniki, 1998), 133–47 (a chapter on irony and humor); and D. R. Reinsch, “Komik, Ironie und Humor in der Alexias Anna Komnenes,” in *Pour l’amour de Byzance: Hommage à Paolo Odorico*, ed. C. Gastgeber, C. Messis, D. I. Mureşan, and F. Ronconi (Frankfurt am Main, 2013), 221–30.

28 See B. Baldwin, *The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover* (Amsterdam, 1983), iv, for the Byzantine manuscript transmission; see also “Humor,” *ODB* 2:956 (which is a very brief entry).

29 L. Garland, “Basil II as Humorist,” *Byzantion* 59 (1999): 321–43; eadem, “Conformity and Licence at the Byzantine Court in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: The Case of Imperial Women,” *ByzF* 21 (1995): 101–15.

30 F. Tinnefeld, “Zum profanen Mimos in Byzanz nach dem Verdikt des Trullanums (691),” *Byzantina* 6 (1974): 323–43; P. Marciniak, “How to Entertain the Byzantines? Mimes and Jesters in Byzantium,” in *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. E. Vitz and A. Öztürkmen (Turnhout, 2014), 125–49.

31 B. Baldwin, “A Talent to Abuse: Some Aspects of Byzantine Satire,” *ByzF* 8 (1982): 9–28. See also M. Kyriakis, “Satire and Slapstick in Seventh and Twelfth Century Byzantium,” *Byzantina* 5 (1973): 291–306.

32 G. Halsall, “Funny Foreigners: Laughing with the Barbarians in Late Antiquity,” in *Humour, History and Politics* (n. 12 above). This seems to be the conclusion one must also draw from the observations made in J. Hagen, “Laughter in Procopius’s *Wars*,” in Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages* (n. 12 above), 141–64.

33 P. Magdalino, “Tourner en dérision à Byzance,” in *La dérision au Moyen Âge*, ed. E. Crouzet-Pavan and J. Verger (Paris, 2007), 55–72.

The kind of humor that has emerged from the studies made since Alexiou’s statement deviates from social, moral, and sexual norms. It is decidedly non-conformist. More learned instances of humor are often dismissed in scholarship, because, allegedly, the texts of the elite give us a distorted perspective that filters out the more irreverent, and hence more interesting, forms of humor. The humor of the intellectual elite is only occasionally thought to reflect the humor of the *homo byzantinus*, in whose everyday life many scholars are interested. Yet this fact itself may be interesting. From a sociological perspective, humor is used as an important force in defining the elite and creating distinctions. Therefore, a study of the more elitist forms of humor can fruitfully enrich our knowledge of laughter and the comic. The influence of the literary theorist Michail Bakhtin may actually have exercised a pernicious effect on scholarship. Bakhtin’s notions of the carnivalesque and the liberating force of scatological humor have influenced many studies on Byzantine humor.<sup>34</sup> But as Aron Gurevich notes, Bakhtin presents a one-sided view of medieval culture, privileging inversion and masquerade to the detriment of other aspects of humor and laughter.<sup>35</sup>

Humor in letters is particularly intellectual and cerebral, conforming to rather than challenging the existing social order. It presents wit and playfulness rather than outright jokes. But what makes this kind of humor interesting is that it is anchored in a transparent communicative situation. In letters, we see humor in action, communicated from one person to another. We see how relationships are shaped, how solidarities are forged, and how common ethics are celebrated or fine-tuned. However, the quest for humor in letters is impeded by the fact that jokes are often based on information that is privately shared by the letter writer and recipient. The letter is by definition an expression and confirmation of a private relationship. Not having to restate the obvious is in itself a sign of mutual understanding and hence friendship. Moreover, it is difficult to gauge the effect of concrete instances of humor, since

34 Bakhtin features prominently in Alexiou, “Poverty and the Écriture” (n. 25 above), and Haldon, “Humor and the Everyday” (n. 13 above).

35 A. Gurevich, “Bakhtin and His Theory of Carnival,” in *A Cultural History of Humour from Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (Cambridge, 1997), 54–60.



we have only a few examples in which both halves of two-sided correspondence are extant.

Foteini Kolovou includes a brief discussion of humor and irony in her introduction to the edition of letters of Eustathios of Thessalonike.<sup>36</sup> She notes that contemporaries appreciated his refined wit, and points to some ironic self-portraits, supported by virtuosio double speech (*amphoteroglossia*). There exist also some publications on humor and irony in the letters of the fourth-century Church Fathers, especially Basil of Caesarea.<sup>37</sup> These studies do not seek to explain humor out of a reconstruction of the contemporary norms, codes, and mental frameworks, but rely instead on our own interpretive framework, that is, our perception of what is humorous. As an example, I should note that all these studies marvel at the strange mixture of details of everyday life and lofty subjects, resulting in a typically humorous clash. However, this perceived incongruity may be just a natural feature of the Byzantine letter, which was both literary and real, fulfilling practical goals as well as (certainly in Basil's case) providing moral edification and theological discussion.

The epistolary networks in the tenth to twelfth centuries chiefly consisted of high-level officials, both in ecclesiastical hierarchy and state administration. In their letters, these members of the intellectual elite typically treat each other as "friends," revering *philia* as an ideal.<sup>38</sup> The concept of *philia* implied devotion to intellectualism. Letters are by definition a friendly

genre. No wonder that we encounter especially friendly humor—no outright abuse or crude jokes here (in significant contrast to some poetry of the period). This is a world of refinement, of elegance, and of good manners.

In the following, I avoid the trap about which Cicero and Voltaire warned us. I will not try to provide an answer to the question of what was funny in Byzantium and why, although some patterns will emerge. Rather I will seek to clarify the cultural frameworks in which humor was appreciated, what role Byzantine letter writers attributed to it, and how it helped to shape a social and cultural identity. Also, I do not rely on my own interpretive strategy to identify jokes. Instead, I use as my point of departure some examples in which we can identify reactions to humor (and wit, playfulness, mockeries, etc.), or humorous passages explicitly marked as such by the author, be it in the letter itself, in a follow-up letter, or in an external text. First, I deal with misunderstandings: letters that try to clear up a failed joke in a previous letter. Second, I give some examples in which the anticipated reaction of laughter or smiles is described (or prescribed) in the text itself. Third, I discuss banter and playful speech that is announced as such, for various reasons. And finally, I look at a remarkable text in which a Byzantine author analyzes his own humor.

### Asteiotes

To understand the social and cultural background of humor, wit, and playfulness in learned Byzantine literature one must first understand the idea of *asteiotes*.<sup>39</sup> It is a concept inherited from classical antiquity; *urbanitas* (whence English "urbanity") is its Latin counterpart.<sup>40</sup> It refers to the personal qualities of a city dweller, qualities that are beyond reach for someone living outside the city. But it does not refer only to education and the acquisition of formal knowledge. Rather,

36 F. Kolovou, ed., *Die Briefe des Eustathios von Thessalonike* (Munich and Leipzig, 2006), 15\*–21\*.

37 G. Tsananas, "Humor bei Basilius dem Grossen," in *Philoxenia: Prof. Dr. Bernhard Kötting gewidmet von seinen griechischen Schülern*, ed. A. Kallis (Münster, 1980), 259–79; and K. Nikolakopoulos, "Der Humor als rhetorischer Ausdruck bei Basileios dem Grossen," *Orthodoxes Forum: Zeitschrift des Instituts für Orthodoxe Theologie der Universität München* 23, no. 2 (2009): 147–53, who concludes that Basil uses humor to achieve pedagogical aims and moral edification. See also C. Macé, "L'ironie dans les *Discours* de Grégoire de Nazianze," in *Approches de la Troisième Sophistique: Hommages à Jacques Schamp*, ed. E. Amato, A. Roduit, and M. Steinrück (Brussels, 2006), 469–76. Some letters of Basil are also discussed in D. G. Tsamis, "Η ειρωνεία στα αντιαιρετικά συγγράμματα του Μ. Βασιλείου," in *Τόμος εόρτιος χιλιοστής εξακοσιοστής επετείου Μεγάλου Βασιλείου* (1979–379) (Thessalonike, 1981), 25–41.

38 On friendship in letters, see F. Tinnefeld, "Freundschaft in den Briefen des Michael Psellos: Theorie und Wirklichkeit," *JÖB* 22 (1973): 151–68; and E. Limousin, "Lettrés en société: 'Filos bios' ou 'politikos bios'?" *Byzantion* 69 (1999): 344–65. See also M. Mullett, "Byzantium: A Friendly Society?" *Past and Present* 118 (1988): 3–24.

39 On *asteiotes* in Byzantine literature, see P. Magdalino, "In Search of the Byzantine Courtier: Leo Choirosphaktes and Constantine Manasses," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. H. Maguire (Washington, DC, 1997), 141–65, esp. 144–45; C. Cupane, "Στήλη τῆς ἀστείότητος: Byzantinische Vorstellungen weltlicher Vollkommenheit in Realität und Fiktion," *FS* 45 (2011): 193–209; F. Bernard, "*Asteiotes* and the Ideal of the Urbane Intellectual in the Byzantine Eleventh Century," *FS* 47 (2013): 129–42.

40 E. S. Ramage, *Urbanitas: Ancient Sophistication and Refinement* (Norman, OK, 1973).

it includes all the aspects of personal deportment that come from education and knowledgeable urban company. As such, an urbane man is cheerful company, he is elegant and careful in his pronunciation, the use of his voice, and his body language, and he punctuates his conversation with witty remarks and delectable sayings without ever being disingenuous or garrulous. As such, asteiotes values a smile over laughter, spontaneity rather than studied pedantry.

For Byzantine intellectuals, asteiotes and related ideas (notably the qualification of *politikos*) emphasize the distinction between the urban elite in Constantinople and the rest of the population. Asteiotes kept intruders at bay who wanted to make use of the opportunities of education to gain promotion and access to the elite. Precisely because asteiotes depends on the use of less formal, more subjective traits, it is a powerful tool for the self-identification of a group.

In a letter to a former classmate, Michael Psellos elaborates on the value of ἀστεϊσματα, “urbane jokes” or “witticisms,” to their friendship, as the friend often lagged behind in sending letters:<sup>41</sup>

Νηλεὲς σὺ καὶ ἀμείλιχος μὴδὲ παλαιᾶς μεμνημένος  
φιλίας μὴδὲ κοινῆς παιδείας, μὴ μαθημάτων, μὴ  
ὅσα παιδικὰ προσπαίγματα τε καὶ ἀστεϊσματα.  
ὦν ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι μέμνημαι, προσθήσω δέ, ὅτι καὶ  
μεμνήσομαι.

You are merciless and harsh, since you don’t remember our old friendship and the education we shared, the lessons, and all our boyish games and jokes. I still remember them—even more: I will remember them also in the future.

The letter refers to a high universal phenomenon: that of the old boy network. As the letter stresses, the shared education of friends is not only important for the knowledge gained, but also for the development of common behavior. Cliques at school form their own codes regulating their behavior, and these codes remain impenetrable to others. Because of shared career paths, these little communities prefigure later relationships of power and friendship in which these codes remain

important. This holds especially true for the mid-eleventh-century environment of Psellos, in which talented courtiers and intellectuals based their influence and careers on education. Psellos expresses in the letter above the importance of games and jokes in this process of male socialization. In another letter, he expressly opposes asteiotes to a monastic life style, thus marking it as a defining feature of his own social group.<sup>42</sup> Many of Psellos’s letters thrive on friendly relationships created through education,<sup>43</sup> and references to games and banter are never far away. In a letter to his former pupils Constantine and Nikephoros, nephews of the patriarch Michael Keroullarios, Psellos, in an effort to amuse them, offers to play a game, just as they did in the past when he was their teacher.<sup>44</sup> Michael Choniates, too, in a letter to a close friend, argues that the playful but sophisticated games in which they indulged during their youth formed the basis of their friendship.<sup>45</sup>

The importance of elegant banter and playfulness in the behavioral code of this social environment is echoed in many letters. In a letter to an unidentified high-ranking official, Psellos says that he still remembers the dinner table talk and games he and his friend once shared. He praises the lightheartedness of his company, his friendly manners, and his graceful smile.<sup>46</sup> In another letter, he mentions “graceful laughter” as one of the habits of friendship, alongside embraces, addresses, and gestures.<sup>47</sup> And in a letter to his good friend Eustratios Choirosphaktes he mentions how much he misses their gatherings and conversations, when “we sometimes bantered, and sometimes were serious,” that are now replaced by a letter. He also brings to mind the cheerful spirit and the “sweet laughter” of their shared friends.<sup>48</sup> In the same vein, Michael Italikos evokes in a letter to Lizix the sweet laughter that they

41 Michael Psellos, *Letter* 17, ed. E. Kurtz and F. Drexel, *Scripta Minora* (Milan, 1942), 2:21.25–29. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

42 Michael Psellos, *Letter* 54, ed. K. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη* (Venice and Paris, 1876), 287.2.

43 F. Bernard, “Educational Networks in the Letters of Michael Psellos” (forthcoming).

44 K. Snipes, “A Letter of Michael Psellos to Constantine the Nephew of Michael Cerularios,” *GRBS* 22 (1981): 89–107.

45 Michael Choniates, *Letter* 41, ed. F. Kolovou, *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae* (Berlin, 2001), esp. lines 2–6.

46 Psellos, *Letter* 146, ed. Kurtz and Drexel, esp. 172.8–13.

47 Psellos, *Letter* 263, ed. Kurtz and Drexel, 309.8–9: “χαρίεντι γέλῳτι.”

48 Psellos, *Letter* 25, ed. P. Gautier, “Quelques lettres de Psellos inédites ou déjà éditées,” *REB* 44 (1986): 111–97, at 176.16–17:

share with their common friend Theodore Prodromos, and the pleasure they give to each other.<sup>49</sup> The urbanity expected in letters seems to be an extension of the urbanity expected in conversation when friends of this caliber met in person.

One can thus see how the common ethos of *asteiotes* also includes a conditioning of emotions: cheerfulness and laughter, both of a moderated and elegant kind, are held in high esteem. Emotions are central to letters, in the sense that letters frequently describe emotions and attach great importance to them.<sup>50</sup> Letters bring genuine joy, or at least consolation.<sup>51</sup> We should not underestimate the value of letters as entertainment in a world without mass communication and an empire in which administrative realities made it necessary for peers to be geographically separated from each other. Laughter and, even more commonly, smiles are often mentioned as desirable or expected emotional reactions to letters. Psellos describes as follows his reaction upon receiving a letter from a friend: “At that moment, I realized that not only sadness and tears have a great impact on a person, making him thunderstruck, but also enjoyment and laughter shake and agitate someone when they violently set upon him.”<sup>52</sup> Psellos then enumerates all the enjoyment he found in the letter, mentioning among other features the “urbanity [*asteiotes*] of his syllables.”<sup>53</sup> Psellos also laughs himself when reading others’ letters.<sup>54</sup> Theophylact of Ochrid also expects his friend to smile

at a letter of his,<sup>55</sup> and, in a passage which is interesting from many points of view, he describes another kind of laughter caused by the defects of a letter.<sup>56</sup> Michael Choniates describes how his friend made Michael “smile and be moderately exhilarated with his letters.”<sup>57</sup> Michael’s letter itself is an elaborate game involving many allusions. It is significant, from the perspective of moral inhibitions with regard to laughter, that Michael tones down the desired emotional reaction: not outright laughter, but smiles and moderate mirth are the emotional expressions he clings to.

### Misunderstandings

In oral communication, jokes, banter, irony, playful derision, and other humorous devices are marked as such by extratextual means: intonation, body language, etc. In turn, the only appropriate reaction to humor is laughter, which instantly removes any doubt about the seriousness of what has been said—especially useful when the joke actually includes an insult or a potential offense. Letters, in contrast, lack these means (although there are some extratextual options, such as the messenger and the gift): in most cases, the text had to convey the play on its own. Misunderstandings were much more likely to arise in letters.

Derision is particularly at stake here: mockeries, jibes, and irreverent remarks. These often seek to transgress the apparent rules of correct social behavior. Mockeries in letters are (nearly) all meant to remain friendly, but they involve a great risk: where does friendly teasing stop and real ridicule begin? Stephen Halliwell has made the very useful distinction between playful and consequential laughter, pointing out that the two are very close to each other and only a few contextual factors mark the difference.<sup>58</sup> Byzantines, so inclined to abuse, were conscious of the thin line between the two. Kekaumenos’s *Strategikon*, for

“τὰ μὲν ἐπαίζομεν, τὰ δὲ ἐσπουδάζομεν· ἐνθυμουμαι τὴν ἱλαρὰν τοῦ Ἰασίτου ψυχὴν, τοὺς ἡδεῖς γέλωτας.”

49 Michael Italikos, *Letter* 25, ed. P. Gautier, *Michel Italikos: Lettres et discours* (Paris, 1972), 178.

50 M. Mullett, “The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter,” in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Oxford, 1981), 75–93, esp. 82; and eadem, “Writing in Early Medieval Byzantium,” in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990), 156–85, esp. 177.

51 A. Littlewood, “The Byzantine Letter of Consolation in the Macedonian and Komnenian Periods,” *DOP* 53 (1999): 19–41, esp. 33–34.

52 Psellos, *Letter* 4, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 4.17–21: “καὶ τότε ἔγνων, ὡς οὐ μόνον λύπη καὶ δάκρυα ἐκπλήττουσί τε καὶ ὥσπερ ἐμβρόντητον ποιοῦσι τὸν ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡδονὴ καὶ γέλως λάβρως ἐμπεσόντα ταραττοῦσι καὶ ἐκπλήττουσιν.”

53 Psellos, *Letter* 4, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 4.25–26: “τὴν ἄστειότητα τῶν συλλαβῶν.”

54 Psellos, *Letter* 159, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 185.9: “τὰ μὲν ἐγέλων αὐτὴν ἐπίων.”

55 Theophylact of Ochrid, *Letter* 106, ed. P. Gautier, *Theophylacte d'Achrida: Lettres* (Thessalonike, 1986), line 3: “τοῦτω [sc. γράμματι] προσγέλασεις ὡς πολυστίχῳ καὶ οὐχ ἥττον φίλου ψυχὴν ἐπευφραίνοντι.” For Theophylact and the therapeutic value of letters, see also M. Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid: Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Archbishop* (Aldershot, 1997), 28.

56 Theophylact, *Letter* 60.34–35.

57 Michael Choniates, *Letter* 106.43–44: “ἐπιμειδιᾶσαι καὶ διαχυθῆναι μετρίως τοῖς γράμμασιν.”

58 Halliwell, *Greek Laughter* (n. 18 above), 19–38.

example, warns against buffoonery, since a playful joke can easily backfire and become real abuse.<sup>59</sup> But why do this, if it is so risky? Sociologists have pointed out that risk is a necessary element in a social group that claims some exclusivity. The members of this group continually test each other to prove their own worth. The art of playful derision implies a tacit understanding that the recipient will not be offended. Members of a social group establish a presumption of trust.<sup>60</sup> Pierre Bourdieu explains how the playful treatment of rules and conventions, sometimes slightly transgressing them, is a hallmark of the truly knowledgeable actor in a given social field and carries significant social prestige.<sup>61</sup> An alternative boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable is formed, a boundary that is impenetrable for outsiders. Knowing when to “take a joke well” and when to hazard an apparent insult testifies to a sensibility of tacit conventions within a certain social group. Therefore, playful derision is a strong unifying agent of friendship and at the same time a dividing force between a social group and the outside world.

I wish to discuss here some letters that respond to a reaction of the recipient to an earlier letter by the same author. In the follow-up letter, the author tries to clear up a misunderstanding that arose because of playful derision in his first letter. These accounts give us unique insight into some assumptions behind joking and teasing that might otherwise remain unspoken. Normally a joker does not explain the framework of shared assumptions that underlies the joke, precisely because the humor arises when this framework appears in a surprising, novel way. However, if the joke is missed and instead interpreted on the level of “normal” discourse, the speaker is compelled to explain anew the rules of the game to avoid damaging their relationship. The fact that quite a few such letters exist suggests that joking, teasing, and playful derision were widespread in Byzantine letter writing (with the majority of instances completely eluding us).<sup>62</sup>

59 Kekaumenos, *Strategikon*, ed. M. D. Spadaro, *Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo: Strategikon* (Alessandria, 1998), §155, p. 196. See also Magdalino, “Tournier en dérision” (n. 32 above), 56.

60 The classic and still useful text on this topic is A. Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships,” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York, 1965), 90–104.

61 P. Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris, 1980), 57–60. See also Halsall, “Introduction” (n. 12 above), 12.

62 Of course, there are more examples in Byzantine epistolography than the ones quoted here within our chronological framework.

A first example is a letter of Michael Psellos to the *epi ton deeseon*, an important functionary, but not a member of the inner circle of Psellos’s best friends. What went wrong? In a previous letter, Psellos had teased his friend somewhat, probably about a physical feature. This prompted an indignant reply. Now Psellos tries to repair the damage. He argues that his previous letter was full of praises, but his friend only had eyes for one derisive remark made in passing. Psellos does not deny that he had poked fun at his friend: twice he uses the verb *σκώπτω* (to mock). But his friend took it the wrong way and was insulted. By reacting this way, says Psellos, he does not comply with the “rule.”<sup>63</sup> The use of this word indicates that the conventions for the urbane community were quite strongly felt. Psellos states anew the expected properties of an “urbane man,” and explains the consequences of his friend’s reaction:

ἵνα σεμνὸς φαίνη καὶ περιττός, ἀναιρεῖς μὲν λόγου χάριτας, ἀναιρεῖς δὲ φιλίας θάρσος, μισεῖς δὲ γλώττης χαριεντισμούς, καὶ ἀθετεῖς παιδιάν, ἢ μόνη τῷ βίῳ καταμεμιγμένη ἱλαρὰν ἡμῶν ποιεῖ τὴν ζώην· καὶ σοὶ μὲν εὐφυῶς ἔχει τὸ σώμα, ἡμεῖς δὲ παίζοντες ἴσως τὴν μορφὴν ἐπισκώπτομεν.

In order to appear solemn and exaggerated, you reject the charms of words, you reject the audacity that belongs to friendship, you detest facetiousness in speech, and you dispense with play, the only thing that can make our life more cheerful, when we include it in our lifestyle. You surely have a magnificent body, but I perhaps make fun of its appearance while jesting.<sup>64</sup>

Psellos stresses that his mockery was made only “while jesting,” marking it as playful derision. Significantly, Psellos links the appreciation of joking with the “audacity of friendship” (*φιλίας θάρσος*). In Byzantine society, speech was conditioned by social hierarchies, and Byzantine letter writers show themselves to be very

See for example Ignatios the Deacon, *Letter 15*, ed. C. Mango and S. Efthymiadis, *The Correspondence of Ignatios the Deacon* (Washington, DC, 1997), 54.

63 Psellos, *Letter 12*, ed. Sathas, 245.14: “τῷ κανόνι διήλεξαί.”

64 Psellos, *Letter 12*, ed. Sathas, 245.22–27.



sensitive to this, notably in the forms of address they use.<sup>65</sup> A friendly relationship implies a certain freedom of speech, some space for teasing and irreverence. Psellos also links a humorous sensibility to an appreciation of rhetorical charm. His friend had remained “solemn,” which could in other circumstances be a positive value, but which in this limited milieu was not always appreciated. Moreover, Psellos again underlines the consolatory, almost therapeutic value of play.

He goes on to argue (complete with examples) that a “true philosopher” does not really care about external appearance, and thus should be able to appreciate a joke about his looks. After this, the playful/consequential opposition is again brought up:

Εἰ δέ τις σοὶ ἀληθῶς τὴν ὕβριν προήνεγκε, τί ἂν ἐποίησας, ὅποτε οὕτως σκωφθεὶς μετὰ παιδιᾶς οὐκ εὐμενῶς τὴν χάριν ἐδέξω;

If someone really had offended you, what would you have done, since, when being mocked in jest, you did not take this pleasure in good part?<sup>66</sup>

Psellos is forced to carefully distinguish between playful teasing and real offense (in Greek, the term ὕβρις is a very severe one; σκώπτω refers to mockery). Psellos states that his jokes were just a game, literally, but apparently the game could be more dangerous than it seems. “Play” (παιδιά and cognates) is a central idea; in the fragments of the letter quoted above, it occurs three times. It serves as a warranty that a statement should not be taken at face value. It is also represented as something absolutely necessary in the liberal and urbane lifestyle that Psellos propagates.

Another letter of Psellos, addressed to his good friend and former pupil Constantine, nephew of the patriarch Michael Keroullarios, begins thus:

Μή ποτε οὐ καλῶς, οὐδὲ ὡς παιδιὰν ἐδέξω τὸν νοῦν τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, φιλτάτη ψυχῇ; ἐγὼ δὲ μικροῦ δεῖν καὶ ὠρχοῦμην, ὅτε ταύτην ἐδημιούργουν, καὶ σέ γε ὦμην συνορχήσασθαί μοι καὶ μετασχεῖν τοῦ θεάτρου.

So apparently you did not take the meaning of the letter in a good way, not as a joke, my dearest soul? I instead, I almost even danced when I composed it, and I was sure that you would dance together with me and participate in the performance.<sup>67</sup>

Psellos places his joke under the aegis of shared appreciation for refined humor. Psellos repeats this later in the letter: he has written this letter and set up his joke so that Constantine could laugh and enjoy, and praise Psellos for his ingenuity.<sup>68</sup> Laughter features prominently in this letter, and it is clear that genuine enjoyment and fun were deemed important ingredients of epistolary exchange. After the exordium above, Psellos argues that just like lovers teasing each other, or roses also giving thorns, so charm and pleasantries should be accompanied by some barbs. In other words, jibes are allowed and even considered desirable in this “joking relationship.” The metaphor of the theater is present throughout the entire letter. Psellos likens his joke to a theatrical performance. In order to make his joke effective, he says, he faithfully mimicked the character, the situation, and the external features, just as an actor would. Psellos unveils here the workings of successful humor. A joke works when it faithfully garbs itself as serious reality before being unmasked. Also important in this letter is the opposition of “real” insult and a mockery made “in jest.” The word παιδιά and its cognates again feature prominently.<sup>69</sup> He repeats his sentiment from the introduction: “Don’t you understand that I wrote this in jest [παίζων]?” Elsewhere he states that his letter was meant as Constantine’s “toy” (τὰ σὰ παιδικά). Play is the overarching concept that allows Psellos to breach normal social conventions. The recurrent juxtaposition of play and seriousness, in the letters of Psellos and others, may owe something to Plato’s dialogues.<sup>70</sup>

On two occasions, Psellos had to fine-tune his relationship with John Mauropous, his erstwhile teacher and close friend. One letter indicates that Mauropous had reacted indignantly to a teasing letter

65 M. Grünbart, *Formen der Anrede im byzantinischen Brief vom 6. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 2005).

66 Psellos, *Letter* 12, ed. Sathas, 247.14–16.

67 Psellos, *Letter* 184, ed. Sathas, 467–69.

68 Ibid., 468.17–18: “Ἦν’ ἔχοις καὶ γελᾶν καὶ τρυφᾶν, καὶ με τῆς γλώττης ἐγκωμιάζειν.”

69 Ibid., 467.12: παιδιά and l.26: ἀντιπαίζομεν; 468.11: παίζων and l.29: προσπαῖλαι and παιδικά.

70 See for instance Plato, *Gorgias* 481b.

from Psellos.<sup>71</sup> Psellos argues that his previous letter was meant to be interpreted in an ironic way, as had been the case before. This is of course a significant indication for the presence and importance of irony in letter writing. Psellos faults the overly serious nature of his friend: he thought he knew him as someone who could mix the serious and the playful, but apparently Mauropous is stuck in his severe stance. Thus, Psellos's call for Mauropous to be more "pleasant" (*χαρίεις*) once more specifies the behavior expected from an urbane intellectual. In another letter, Psellos deplores Mauropous's lack of cheerfulness. According to Psellos, Mauropous risks suppressing completely the charms of friendship, which moderate its solemn character. Psellos did not feel he had the obligation to be somber in his letters, "speaking without a smile," merely because Mauropous was beset by worries.<sup>72</sup> Receptiveness to joking and resistance against surliness and excessive seriousness are important elements of the *asteiotes* ideal celebrated in this limited group.

Let us now consider the twelfth-century grammarian and author John Tzetzes, who had to defend himself in a letter to an unidentified bishop.<sup>73</sup> What was the failed joke in this case? Apparently, Tzetzes had received a precious gift from his friend, an encomium, and he had given the appearance of not being grateful for this gift. He says:

ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἐσμεν οὐκ ἀγνώμονες, κἄνπερ πρὸς σὲ  
πρότερον ἀκραιφνεστάτῃ φιλίᾳ τὴν παρρησίαν  
λαβόντες ἡστεῖσάμεθα.

I am not ungrateful, although I have poked fun at you, being so audacious because of our most genuine friendship.<sup>74</sup>

In the verb *ἡστεῖσάμεθα*, we recognize the root of *asteiotes*. Tzetzes had intended to make a friendly and elegant joke. The main argument that Tzetzes adduces is that such jokes are allowed because genuine

friendship should imply some license, recalling the "audacity of friendship" that we found in Psellos earlier. Tzetzes twice uses the word *παρρησία*, here and in the last sentence of his letter. In my view, this term encompasses the available latitude of acceptable speech, as conditioned by social hierarchy.<sup>75</sup> In a friendly relationship, some license may be taken in conversation, even if it is slightly irreverent on the surface. Tzetzes gives here the appearance of bending the usual rules concerning gratitude. In contrast to Psellos, Tzetzes takes the burden of the misunderstanding upon himself. In the last sentence, once more repeating the *parresia* and the *asteion* of his enterprise, he admits it may have been a mistake and apologizes. Ultimately, it is the sin of ingratitude with which Tzetzes was accused. As Dmitri Chernoglazov points out, the giving of gifts in Byzantium required the appropriate ceremony.<sup>76</sup> Breaking the normal rules of gratitude was possible, but this was a dangerous game, one in which Tzetzes obviously misjudged his audience.

Uncertainty about the consequential or playful nature of mockery can also be gauged from a letter of Michael Choniates in which he expresses his hope that the jibes launched by his friend do not result from real "hate."<sup>77</sup> Conversely, some letter writers explicitly state that they have taken a joke from their correspondent in a good way. The tenth-century author Symeon Magistros uses this strategy in a response to a letter from the emperor.<sup>78</sup> He praises the qualities of the imperial letter, saying that even if there were some harsh words in it, this is still sweet to "people who have the right taste for these [harsh words]."<sup>79</sup> Someone who is subjected to "beautiful" mockery will not feel insulted: in the Greek we see again the distinction between *σκῶμμα* and *ὑβρις*, mockery as opposed to real insult. Symeon then enumerates all the laudable stylistic and rhetorical features of the imperial letter,

75 Chernoglazov, "Piat' pisem," takes a more general perspective, referring to the liberal lifestyle proposed by Tzetzes.

76 Ibid.

77 Michael Choniates, *Letter* 3, esp. 6.19–21.

78 Symeon Magistros, *Letter* 91, ed. J. Darrouzès, *Epistoliers byzantins du X<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1960), 152. For the identity of the emperor, Darrouzès hesitates between Constantine VII and Nikephoros Phokas.

79 Ibid., 152.7: "τοῖς καλῶς αὐτῶν γενομένοις." The letter was accompanied by a gift of cinnamon. Curiously enough, this is likely also the case with the similar letter of Michael Choniates discussed above.

71 Psellos, *Letter* 229, ed. Kurtz and Drexler.

72 Psellos, *Letter* 183, ed. Sathas, esp. the passage at 466.11–21.

73 John Tzetzes, *Letter* 16, ed. P. Leone, *Ioannes Tzetzes: Epistulae* (Leipzig, 1972). On humor and *parresia* in this letter, see also D. Chernoglazov, "Piat' pisem Ioanna Tsetsa: Avtoportret Visantiiskogo Intellekuala," *VizVrem* 67 (2008): 152–64, esp. 161.

74 Tzetzes, *Letter* 16, 30.13–16.

even praising his “effectiveness in mockeries.”<sup>80</sup> The appreciation of mockery works as a socially exclusive force: more educated people understand the arcane rules that underlie the mockery, even if they contravene more formal rules. Derision can only work if both parties understand that no harm is intended, that the mockery is playful. Of course, Symeon does not have much choice here, since he is writing to the emperor. In asymmetrical relationships, the hierarchically superior person has more latitude to mock and tease, while the mocked had better show that he appreciates the joke. The license to mock people at will is a confirmation of social superiority, a phenomenon that sociologists call “downward humor.”<sup>81</sup>

### Inscribed Laughter

We have already pointed out that humor in letters has an important impediment to overcome: that of physical separation. There is no possibility for laughing together, which in live conversation immediately makes clear the playful nature of a joke. However, letter writers sometimes resorted to other ways of conveying laughter. They often anticipate the expected reaction of the recipient upon reading their letter. They describe laughter as happening now, as if an oral conversation is taking place. It is a kind of laughter that can be said to be “inscribed” in the text.

For example, in the beginning of a letter in which Psellos addresses a request to Basil Maleses, a good friend of his, the author jokes that no one could be happier than Maleses upon receiving so many requests and entreaties from him. The joke here is that Psellos contravenes expectations: mostly, requests such as this one begin by stating how sorry the letter writer is to bother his friend in such an oppressive way. Psellos radically reverses this by suggesting Maleses should be happy, but he makes sure Maleses cannot take the joke in a bad way:<sup>82</sup>

εἰ μὲν οὖν ἐγέλασας, ἐπέγνως τῆς φιλίας τὸν χαρακτῆρα. εἰ δὲ ἐστύγνασας ὡς ὑβριοπαθήσας, ἐγὼ πάλιν ἰῶμαι τοῦμόν.

If you have now laughed, you have recognized the character of our friendship. But if your face has clouded over, as if you suffered from an offense, I will amend my words.

After this, Psellos lavishes some unconditional praise on Maleses. Psellos apparently felt it necessary to add this clarification. Psellos of course cannot see Maleses’s reaction or even be certain of how he would react. He expects Maleses to laugh, and he sees this laughter as a sign of their friendship. But the joke could have been taken in a bad way too: Psellos anticipates that Maleses could be offended. Of course, this could also be a game in its own right, but it is clear that Psellos is keen to point out how humor should be appreciated in their relationship. Again, the word ὕβρις points to a “real” offense.

The next example, again taken from Psellos’s letter corpus, is somewhat more intricate. Psellos writes to John Doukas, an important patron in the latter part of his life, to whom he often wrote playful letters. The occasion of the letter is John’s gift of truffles. Psellos’s response teems with fanciful explanations, complete with some risqué language, fables, and mythological stories. Then, Psellos openly snubs John’s gift: instead of truffles, he would have preferred meat. Pursuing this quite hazardous course, he closes his letter as follows:<sup>83</sup>

πυνθάνομαι δέ σου τῆς πάντα καλλίστης καὶ ἀσυγκρίτου ψυχῆς, καὶ πυνθάνομαι οὐ (μὰ τὴν ἱεράν σου καὶ τριπόθητον κεφαλὴν) χρειωδῶς, ἀλλὰ ὀλκῶς, ἔν’ ἔχοις τρυφᾶν καὶ γελᾶν. πυνθάνομαι δ’ οὖν· οὐχὶ πατρὶς ἢ πολυῦμνητος Παφλαγονία ἐστίν, ὅθεν ἔστι ταρίχη κρέα τὰ ὕεια; τί δ’ οὖν ἐγέλασας; εἰσὶ καὶ παρ’ ἡμῖν ὀδόντες οὐκ ὅπτα καὶ ἐφθὰ καὶ ταρίχη ἀλλὰ καὶ ὠμὰ μικροῦ δεῖν ταῦτα θοινούμενοι.

I have a question for you, my most dear and incomparable man, and this question (I swear this by your sacred and beloved head) is not a specific, but a universal question, so that you can enjoy and laugh. So this is my question: don’t you hail from that much-famed land of Paphlagonia, where pickled pork meat comes from? Why did you laugh now? I have teeth

80 Ibid., line 17: “τὸ τῶν σκωμμάτων εὖστοχον.”

81 Zijdeveld, “Sociology” (n. 4 above), 55–56 with further bibliography.

82 Psellos, *Letter* 132, ed. Kurtz and Drexel, 154.22–23.

83 Psellos, *Letter* 233, ed. Kurtz and Drexel, 283.26–284.5

too, and they feast not only on roasted, boiled, or pickled, but also on all but raw meat.

Obviously, Psellos is joking, and this on several levels. First, he snubs the gift, in a gesture that is not unheard of in Byzantine letter writing,<sup>84</sup> but that nevertheless risks being taken badly, as in the example of Tzetzes. Moreover, Byzantine letter writers usually reject gifts because they want more words, but here Psellos asks for another kind of gift, which goes a step further. The normal social conventions, stipulating gratitude for gifts, are ingrained and tacitly agreed upon to such an extent that they can be slightly transgressed. Psellos explores the boundaries of the acceptable. Second, he (albeit with apparent hesitation) refers to Doukas's Paphlagonian origin. Paphlagonians were the butt of many Byzantine jokes; they were seen as shrewd, unreliable, and boorish.<sup>85</sup> The addition "much-famed" here is undoubtedly ironic.

Psellos sets some mechanisms in place to make sure these jokes will be favorably received. He first states that he intends John to laugh, and then he reacts, seemingly astonished, as if he had already laughed. Psellos has to fill in the laughter himself here, in the past tense, pretending that John has already laughed before he can read any further. The laughter is inscribed in the letter, thus imposing the desired reaction of his correspondent to his risky mockeries.

In another letter, a long enigmatic story of Psellos's troubles including (as it seems) some sexually shameful details, Psellos says: "You laugh at these things, but I am closer to tears,"<sup>86</sup> and he concludes the letter by saying that he has turned his situation into a "learned game" so that his (unidentified) friend can laugh at another's misfortune. Psellos realizes that his account is enigmatic. It is a divination game, where the friend has to

guess what event in Psellos's life is meant by the elaborate imagery, which is for us, as far as I can judge, utterly impossible to disentangle.

I have encountered this strategy particularly in the letters of Michael Psellos, but there are some examples in letters of other writers as well. When Eustathios of Thessalonike embarks on a parody of a fable, he announces that this is meant to elicit a "light smile" from his readers (both the addressee Nikephoros Komnenos and his brother).<sup>87</sup> A perhaps more intriguing case is to be found in a letter of John Mauropous that describes the arrival of an arrogant man in the imperial palace (perhaps Psellos?). Mauropous does not identify the man, and his account is interwoven with many allusions.<sup>88</sup> Mauropous supposes that his friend is now laughing ("But what are you hiding, as you laugh?"),<sup>89</sup> in which case, Mauropous says, he has probably recognized the identity of the man described. This private joke, or rather, riddle, should thus provide the addressee (and other contemporary readers?) with occasion to laugh.

### Banter Announced

Byzantine letters often announce that they will embark on a piece of lighthearted discourse. They usually call this *χαριεντισμός* (verb: *χαριεντίζομαι*), which can refer to "banter" or "facetiousness," but certainly not to an outright joke or buffoonery. In this way, the verb marks utterances that are not meant to be interpreted literally, but which nevertheless, through indirect means such as hyperbole, ironic inversion, or metaphoric substitution, convey a message.

Thus, Psellos closes a passage in which he has likened Mauropous to an Olympic god, by saying: "This was written in jest rather than in earnest."<sup>90</sup> In the

84 D. Chernoglazov, "Was bedeuten drei Fische? Betrachtung von Geschenken in byzantinischen Briefen (IV.–XII. Jh.)," in *Geschenke erhalten die Freundschaft: Gabentausch und Netzwerkpflege im europäischen Mittelalter*, ed. M. Grünbart (Münster, 2011), 55–69; idem, "Piat' pisem" (n. 73 above). See also F. Bernard, "Greet Me with Words: Gifts and Intellectual Friendships in Eleventh-Century Byzantium," in Grünbart, ed., *Geschenke*, 1–11.

85 P. Magdalino, "Paphlagonians in Byzantine High Society," in *Byzantine Asia Minor (6th–12th Cent.)*, ed. S. Lambakis (Athens, 1998), 141–50.

86 Psellos, *Letter* 198, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 226.11: "Γέλῳ ἐπὶ τούτοις, ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ καὶ δακρύειν ἐπέρχεται."

87 Eustathios of Thessalonike, *Letter* 8, ed. F. Kolovou, *Die Briefe des Eustathios von Thessalonike* (Munich and Leipzig, 2006), 41.125: "εἰς μειδίαμά τι λεπτόν καὶ σὲ προκαλέσεται." See also Kolovou's introduction, 20–21.

88 John Mauropous, *Letter* 19, ed. A. Karpozilos, *The Letters of Ioannes Mauropous Metropolitan of Euchaita* (Thessalonike, 1990). Karpozilos thinks that the man described is identical with the addressee.

89 Ibid., line 24: "ἀλλὰ τί γελῶν ἐγκαλύπτῃ"; translation from Karpozilos, *Letters*, 88.

90 Psellos, *Letter* 190, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 213.29–30: "ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν περιττὰ καὶ ἐκ περιττοῦ, καὶ πέπαικται μᾶλλον ἢ ἐσπούδασται."



same sentence, he also uses the word *περιττός* (literally “superfluous”), which is not easy to translate: it refers to purposeless but amusing speech (and hence, it is surely not an unequivocally positive term). Psellos justifies his joke by saying he introduces it into his letter so as to offer his friend his “favorite games,” but, he adds, in a “moderate” manner, thereby toning down the humor.<sup>91</sup> In another letter, when Psellos suggests that Constantine Keroullarios will decide a case in favor of a certain man just because he is called Symeon and is notary of the *eidikon*, he adds that he is saying this in jest (using the verb *χαριεντίζομαι*).<sup>92</sup> No doubt this points to a private joke.

Theophylact also identifies playful speech in his letters with the verb *χαριεντίζομαι*. For instance, he permits himself a pleasantry with the empress Maria of Alania.<sup>93</sup> Theophylact jokes that by going to Bulgaria (he was archbishop in Ochrid, then considered part of the region of Bulgaria) the typical stench that Bulgarians exude has also affected him, so just in case, he has sent a piece of scented wood. As usual, several details elude us: to which fragrant wood exactly does Theophylact allude? Also, he seems to play on the expression “to rot” that Byzantines use for a deteriorating personal situation. In any case, this joke is clearly identified as such: introduced by the verb *χαριεντίζομαι* (“make a pleasantry”) and closed by *αστεϊάζομαι* (“make a joke”).

Theophylact also uses the verb *χαριεντίζομαι* to introduce a particularly enigmatic and colorful passage, in which his friend is gently upbraided for not writing quickly enough and is advised to release a friend of Theophylact from military service.<sup>94</sup> The author admits that his words are similar to oracular speech, but he relies on the sharp-wittedness of his friend to solve the riddle. In another letter, Theophylact opposes the verb *χαριεντίζομαι* to the nouns *σεμνότης* (“gravity”) and *εὐλάβεια* (“respect,” here also connected to old age), when concluding an exorbitant and satirical description of a certain Theodore, someone known to sender

and recipient.<sup>95</sup> In another letter, he concludes a particularly playful passage with what is literally a curse: he cannot think of a more painful curse to inflict on this friend than the gout with which he is suffering. Upon this daring utterance, he makes clear that he is only “indulging in playing,”<sup>96</sup> inspired in this by his friend who is full of graciousness (Theophylact repeatedly uses words related to *χάρις* here). In particular Theophylact seems to have relished in obscurity and riddles as ingredients of charm.<sup>97</sup>

In a tenth-century letter of Leo of Synada<sup>98</sup> to the *genikos* (an important official), the author first excuses himself for not writing enough, but then he adds: “But if I should take some license to banter a bit: not even you yourself, my dear lord, wrote abundantly or frequently to us.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, Leo has some accusation to lay at the door of his important friend, but he garbs it in the form of banter, in turn cautiously introduced by announcing that he takes some license here. *Παρρησία* is here again the term that marks this audacious speech. We clearly see that banter and playfulness, if announced as such, can serve as excuses for subtle breaches of the conventions of amiability.

All this should warn us not to take letters too seriously. This also applies to letters that include scientific or philosophical digressions. The most spectacular example is a letter of Michael Italikos to Theodore Prodromos,

95 Theophylact, *Letter* 127, 579.114–15.

96 Theophylact, *Letter* 6, 149.36: “τρυφᾶν σοι δοκῶ παίζων οὕτω.”

97 For riddles and obscurity in Theophylact, see Mullett, *Theophylact*, 152–59.

98 For humor in the letters of Leo of Synada, see M. Grünbart, “Ferngespräche—Zum Briefschreiben im ausgehenden zehnten Jahrhundert,” *Byzantina* 22 (2001): 25–46, esp. 36. For Leo’s “testament”: F. Kolovou, “Eine Persiflage auf das Jenseits: Das ‘Testament’ des Leon von Synada,” *Byzantina* 22 (2001), 47–52.

99 Leo of Synada, *Letter* 45, ed. M. Vinson, *The Correspondence of Leo, Metropolitan of Synada and Syncellus* (Washington, DC, 1985), 72.5–7: “Εἰ δὲ δεῖ τι καὶ παρρησιασάμενον χαριεντίσασθαι, οὐδὲ αὐτός, ὦ μακάριε δέσποτα, πολλὰ καὶ συνεχῇ ἡμῖν ἔγραψας.” My translation is taken from Vinson, but I changed the first part of the sentence. Vinson’s translation is: “Yet if one should temper candor with humor,” taking *δεῖ* as a general moral prescription, and implying that there is another joke present in the letter meant to soften the accusation. In my interpretation, the accusation *is* the joke (or the bit of banter), and *δεῖ* points to an act that is felt as logical consequence, rather than a moral obligation.

91 Ibid., 214.1–2: “ἔξεπίτηδες τῇ ἐπιστολῇ εἰσενήγекται ἀφοσιούντι μοι τῇ σῇ ψυχῇ μετρίως τὰ σὰ παιδικά.”

92 Psellos, *Letter* 45, ed. Sathas, 277.25.

93 Theophylact, *Letter* 4, 141.55–71. See also Mullett, *Theophylact* (n. 55 above), 269–70.

94 Theophylact, *Letter* 109, 529.4–5; see also the references to oracles (*θεσπίσματα*) at l.5, and riddles (*ῥινιζάμην*) at l.14.

lucidly analyzed by Stratis Papaioannou.<sup>100</sup> Michael develops a philosophical argument about how souls can be united by friendship. Making abundant use of neo-Platonic imagery, he arrives at the surprising conclusion that friends in fact should not write letters to each other. Then he makes a dramatic U-turn: “This has been . . . my play to you, my friend,” in order to console Theodore; and he adds: “These are games and toys of your Italikos’s language, not his soul’s beliefs.”<sup>101</sup> After this disclaimer, Michael explains that of course they should send letters to each other. He demolishes his own argument, considering it as nothing more than a rhetorical game, instead of a philosophical pursuit. We may recall here that Theodore was a friend with whom Michael shared much laughter (see above, on letter 25).

For me, there is no doubt that many philosophical digressions in Michael Psellos’s letters share the same element of play. In a letter to his good friend and former pupil Pothos, Psellos gives a definition of the Platonic idea, but it turns out that he only does this to exhort Pothos to be benevolent to a friend of Psellos. If I interpret the transitional passage correctly, Psellos then says that this philosophical digression may sound a bit “extraordinary and recherché” to Pothos’s ears, whereupon Psellos restates his message in more socially practical and “true” terms.<sup>102</sup> There are other instances when Psellos signals that he is not actually writing truthfully, on one occasion exclaiming: “So? Do I speak the truth here in my letter? No!”<sup>103</sup>

Banter, pleasantries, and playfulness are prominent features in Byzantine letters, adding significantly to the enjoyment of letters. Because these playful passages should not be interpreted literally but rather depend on certain clues (privately shared information,

knowledge of ancient texts, acquaintance with implicit prejudices, etc.), they require a more refined interpretive strategy from the reader, and I would add, even more from the modern reader.

## Self-Exegesis

Among the many odd treasures that Byzantine literature has given us, there is one text that is a godsend when it comes to better understanding the underlying mechanics of interpreting and writing Byzantine letters, although it is underappreciated in this light. This is the *Chiliades* (or *Historiae*) of John Tzetzes, a commentary on his own letters composed in political verse. The *Chiliades* is not really a literary analysis or interpretation; instead, it has a clear didactic goal. Like other Byzantine schoolmasters and commentators, Tzetzes explains all the allusions, mythological stories, and difficult words present in his letters, with occasional remarks on the rhetorical techniques and figures. This includes several instances where Tzetzes identifies jokes, irony, or witticisms.

I will discuss only one example. This is a letter to the monk Eliopolos, who had journeyed to Macedonia. This gives Tzetzes an opportunity to direct some jibes at him:<sup>104</sup>

ἀλλ’ ἔρωσ σου τὴν καρδίαν κατέσχευ, οἶμαι,  
διάπυρος, Ἡροδότου τῶν ἐγκωμίων ἀκούσαντος  
τὰς καθ’ Ἡσίοδον “πυγοστόλους” ἰδεῖν θυγατέρας  
Παιόνων, ἢ τὰς κατὰ τὸν χρυσόγλωττον Ὅμηρον  
πλέον “πυγούς ἀεθλοφόρους, αἱ ἀέθλια πυγαῖς  
ἄροντο.”

I gather that you have caught a burning desire in your heart, after hearing Herodotus’s praises, to see the Paeonic daughters, who have, to use Hesiod’s words, “adorned their buttocks,” or, to use gold-tongued Homer’s expression, “who have award-winning derrières, and pick up prizes with their buttocks.”

The reader has to be well versed in ancient literature in order to appreciate the joke. Paeonians was the name for an ancient tribe, roughly inhabiting the area considered as Macedonia by the Byzantines. Herodotus’s

100 S. Papaioannou, “Language Games, Not the Soul’s Beliefs: Michael Italikos to Theodoros Prodromos, on Friendship and Writing,” in *Byzantinische Sprachkunst: Studien zur byzantinischen Literatur gewidmet Wolfram Hörandner zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. M. Hinterberger and E. Schiffer (Berlin, 2007), 218–33.

101 Michael Italikos, *Letter 1*, ed. P. Gautier, *Michel Italikos: Lettres et discours* (Paris, 1972), 63.17–21: “ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μέν . . . προσέπειξά σοι τῷ φίλῳ. . . καὶ ἔστι τὰ τοιαῦτα τῆς γλώττης τοῦ σοῦ Ἱταλικοῦ προσαυθύματα, ἀλλ’ οὐ τῆς ψυχῆς δόγματα.” Translation from Papaioannou, “Language Games,” 223.

102 Psellos, *Letter 220*, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 262.10–11: “τοῦτο μὲν οὖν περιττὸν καὶ φιλότιμον ἴσως πρὸς τὴν σὴν ἀκοήν, τὸ δ’ ἀληθέστερον καὶ πολιτικώτερον ἄκουε.”

103 Psellos, *Letter 242*, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, 292.24: “τί ποτ’ οὖν; ἀληθεύω οὕτως ἐπιστέλλων; οὐ.”

104 Tzetzes, *Letter 67*, 96.16–20.

*Histories* include a story about Darius, who is captivated by a Paeonian woman,<sup>105</sup> and Hesiod uses the word πυγαστόλος (“buttock-adorned”) for certain women.<sup>106</sup> The term was a favorite with Byzantine commentators. As for the Homeric quote, the original verse line was in fact about horses in a race who were said to be “firm and victorious, who win the prize with their feet.”<sup>107</sup> By supplanting some words for other similar-sounding words (πυγούς, “buttocks,” instead of the Homeric πηγούς, “strong,” an adjective going with the noun for “horses”; and then again πυγαῖς for ποσσίν, “feet”), Tzetzes is able to turn this verse about horse races into a rather risqué description of wanton women. So, there is a whole web of allusions and puns, for which one had to be very much acquainted with ancient literature.

In his *Chiliades*, Tzetzes explains at length all the elements that make up his elaborate joke: the geographical location of the ancient Paeonians and all the textual referents, complete with quotes from Herodotus, Hesiod, and Homer. But interestingly, in the conclusion of his “lesson” on this letter, he also lays bare the intentions he had when using these puns and allusions, and he provides a theoretical background for them:<sup>108</sup>

Ἐγὼ δ' ἀστείζόμενος ταύτας πυγούς εἰρήκειν,  
καὶ τὰ ἀέθλια πυγαῖς καὶ οὐ ποσὶν ἀρέσθαι.  
Τὸ σχῆμα τοῦτο δ' ἄκουσον ὅπως καλεῖν σε θέον.  
Τὸ μὲν πυγούς ἀντὶ πηγούς παραγραμματισμόν  
μοι,  
ἀντὶ ποσὶ δὲ ἄροντο, πυγαῖς ἄροντο πάλιν  
τὸ σχῆμα λέγειν τεχνικῶς νόει μοι παρωδίαν.  
Ἀστεῖσμοῖς ἀμφότερα ταῦτα δὲ χρησιμεύει,  
καὶ κωμωδίας προσφυᾶ γίνωσκε πεφυκέναι.

I was making a joke, calling them [sc. the original horses in Homer] “buttocks”  
and the game not one of running, but of  
buttocks.

Hear now what you must call this figure of speech.

The “pugous” instead of “pegous” is a  
paragrammatismos  
and saying “a game of buttocks” instead of “a  
game of feet,”  
is a figure that in technical terms is called a  
parodia.  
Both figures are useful for jokes,  
and they are appropriate for comedy.

Tzetzes acknowledges that he was joking (something he does not do in the letter itself), twice using a word related to asteiotes. Moreover, he expands on some techniques that can achieve comic effect.<sup>109</sup> The term παραγραμματισμός, “switching of letters,” refers to the pun he made by slightly altering words. The term παρωδία, in turn, is defined here as the modification of a quote of an ancient text so as to create a new meaning (not so far removed then, from our definition of “parody”). Theophylact of Ochrid uses the word in this same sense to refer to a literary quote in his own letter that he slightly adapted to the circumstances, so as to achieve a witty effect.<sup>110</sup> Tzetzes’s comments indicate that Byzantines were very conscious of the use of puns and of clever and oblique allusions in letters, and conscious that these devices were meant to be witty. Hence it is surely worthwhile for us to be alert for these devices when investigating humor in Byzantine letters. The joke is there as a puzzle, a riddle, a challenge to reconstruct a hidden meaning on the basis of erudition. However, it needs to be said that there is of course also a salacious aspect to Tzetzes’s joke, which after all ridicules a monk for going after women because of their attractive derrières. There is a remarkable conjunction of intellectual cerebral enjoyment and irreverent humor, which can also be said to be imbued by gender stereotypes. Tzetzes also attracts attention to devices for wittiness (mostly called by him *asteios*) elsewhere in the *Chiliades*, and his letters teem with puns and subversions of normal epistolary etiquette, but a discussion of all these examples would exceed the bounds of this study.<sup>111</sup>

105 Herodotus, *Histories*, 5.12–13.

106 Hesiod, *Works and Days* 373.

107 *Iliad* 9.123–24 and 9.265–66: “δῶδεκα δ' ἵππους/πηγούς ἀθλοφόρους, οἱ ἀέθλια ποσσὶν ἄροντο.”

108 John Tzetzes, *Chiliades*, ed. P. A. M. Leone, *Ioannis Tzetzæ historiae*, 2nd ed. (Galatina, 2007), 10.234–41 (no. 319).

109 See also Chernoglazov, “Piat' pisem” (n. 73 above), 163.

110 Theophylact, *Letter* 32. 4–5.

111 For example Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 9.345. See also Chernoglazov, “Piat' pisem,” for more examples of humor in Tzetzes’s letters. On puns in his letters, see I. Grigoriadis, *Ιωάννης Τζέτζης: Επιστολαί; Εισαγωγή, μετάφραση, σχόλια* (Athens, 2001), 10–25. See also W. Hörandner,

The self-exegesis of Tzetzes may help us detect those features that Byzantine letter writers considered useful to achieve humorous effect. I will briefly discuss an earlier, less elaborate, self-analytic passage that also allows a glimpse into the construction of Byzantine humor. A tenth-century letter of Niketas Magistros to Sergios, an influential monk, begins thus:<sup>112</sup>

Ἐπαιζόν ὅτε πρὸς οὓς εἰκὸς ἦν παίζειν ἐπέσ-  
τελλον καὶ παραπλοκάς καὶ παρισώσεις  
ἐποιοῦν καὶ κωμικῶν ἐπῶν ἐχρώμην ῥημάτια,  
χάριν ὡς ἡδυσμά τι καὶ κάλλος τοῖς γράμμασι  
μηχανώμενος, ἵνα καὶ ψυχὰς καὶ τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν  
δεχομένων θέλῃ γράμματα. Ἐπεὶ δὲ νῦν πρὸς  
ἄνδρα τὴν ἀποστροφὴν κατ' ἄνδρα κρίνεσθαι  
τὴν εὐγένειαν ἀξιοῦντα, οὗ καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν  
αἰδοῦνται καὶ τύραννοι, γράφειν τὸν κάλαμον  
κεκινήκαμεν, ἄλλης, ὧ θυμέ, δεῖ τῆς γραφῆς, ἄλλης  
τῆς ἀστειότητος τῶν λόγων, καὶ γλώττης, εἰ χρὴ  
τάληθ' ἡ λέγειν, πεπληρωμένης τοῦ πνεύματος.

I was playing when I wrote letters to people with whom it is appropriate to play, inserting poetic quotes and euphonic effects and using little words from comic poetry. I wanted thereby to create grace, as a kind of sweetener, and elegance in my letters, so that the letters would charm the souls and ears of the recipients. But now I move my pen to write an address to a man who requires that nobility should be judged for each man separately, and whose virtue is respected even by dictators. Therefore, my friend, I need another kind of writing, another kind of urbanity in my words, I need a tongue—to tell the truth—that is filled with esprit.

The Greek terms deserve special attention. The editor, Leendert Westerink, points out that Hermogenes uses the word *παραπλοκή* (line 2), literally “admixture,” to describe citations of poetry in a prose text; and indeed, this is something that Niketas does remarkably often

in his letters. The word *παρίσωσις* (line 3) is in rhetorical theory used for equal balancing of clauses in a sentence,<sup>113</sup> but Eustathios of Thessalonike, for example, clearly and repeatedly uses it to refer to assonances and other effects that are based on similar sounds.<sup>114</sup> Niketas may also be thinking primarily of puns or other forms of euphonic effects. The “little words from comical verse” (line 3) may refer to a *recherché* vocabulary, quotes, or expressions typical for comedy.

Niketas specifies that he will leave aside these kinds of puns and allusions. However, he does not abolish all forms of wit, announcing that he will use *another* kind of *asteiotes*. Clearly, the term here again refers to a refined kind of humor, acceptable even to serious people. The chief component is *esprit*: charming wit. Interestingly, Niketas also draws attention to the fact that humor needs to be adjusted to the addressee, according to the laws of appropriateness. He apparently wanted to excuse himself for his humoristic record in earlier letters to other people. Perhaps Sergios had read those letters, and Niketas wanted to ensure that his reputation with the more severe Sergios was not that of a vapid joker.

## How to Proceed?

The observations above cannot be anything but preliminary to a more deeply engaging study of humor in Byzantine letters. Many problems still lie ahead of us. Perhaps one of the more intricate is the status of letters as parts of textual collections, as opposed to standalone documents. If a joke between two friends was based on privately shared information, then why did authors (or perhaps sometimes their pupils) include it in a collection of letters and make it public? Were readers of these collections also supposed to appreciate this sometimes very intimate, or context-based, humor? Were some humorous letters (perhaps especially the more pungent examples) left out when the collection was made? Also, there can be no doubt that the original audience included more people than just the addressee—perhaps a group of common friends or the entire household of the recipient. Were some jokes perhaps intended to be

“Bemerkungen zu den Chiliaden des Ioannes Tzetzes,” *Byzantion* 39 (1969): 108–20, at 119–20; and B. Baldwin, “John Tzetzes and the Philogelos,” *Byzantion* 56 (1986): 339–41.

112 Niketas Magistros, *Letter* 28, ed. L. Westerink, *Nicetas Magistros: Lettres d'un exilé (928–946)* (Paris, 1973), 125.1–9. I ignored the unnecessary conjecture *ποιησόμενοι* after *ἀποστροφῇ*.

113 LSJ, s.v. “παρίσωσις.”

114 Eustathios of Thessalonike, *Commentary on the Iliad*, ed. M. van der Valk, *Commentarii ad Homerī Iliadem*, 4 vols. (Leiden, 1971–87), 4:6.19 and elsewhere.




appreciated primarily by this (still limited) audience? Also, we should take into account the specific social constellation that governed the relationship between sender and recipient: what is the hierarchy between them, what is their common background? And we should gain more insight into the codes and etiquette of epistolary exchange, with all its subtle sensibilities to indebtedness, gratitude, excuses, and so forth.

While I have consciously avoided the question “what made Byzantines laugh,” we can deduce some tendencies from the fragments discussed above. Riddles and other decoding games, including allusions, gave the Byzantines much pleasure and surely counted for them as an example of “witty speech.” Puns are obviously a great source of mirth. But even if much humor can appear cerebral, non-subversive, and relatively innocuous, it is often the case that a more irreverent or taboo subject implicitly lies at the base of the joke: gender and regional stereotypes, food, bodily defects, and sex.

Humor is not always an attractive subject to include in literary interpretation because it makes things infinitely more complex. Texts are no longer

what they seem at first sight. An insult or an offense, to give an important example, is not necessarily a sign of enmity, quite the contrary: these were deemed an important element of close friendship. A philosophical argument can be elaborated just as a piece of bravura intellectual display. The obscurantism of which we often accuse Byzantine epistolography was often actually a game meant to provide entertainment. No wonder that we misunderstand letters—even the addressees themselves did. Could the passages written to clear up misunderstandings, to which we have given ample attention, sometimes themselves be just a kind of joke? It may be difficult to analyze or recognize humor, but we should be able to acknowledge that it existed in the first place, and I would argue this is a necessary step in the ongoing reappraisal of Byzantine epistolography.

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